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ABSTRACT

This paper is a preliminary look at a study on research by teachers. Participants were teachers in Melbourne, Australia, involved in the Project for Enhancing Effective Learning (PEEL) who were interested in designing, conducting, and reporting teacher-led research. Section 1 of the paper explores the last 10 years of teacher research as part of the PEEL program. While many teachers have found that their involvement with PEEL affirmed their efforts and ideas and improved confidence and self-esteem, it has been difficult to gain system-wide support for research as professional development, due to time constraints and concern about system priorities. Qualitative differences between teacher research and more formal research are summarized. In Section 2, participants respond to the analysis in Section 1. Teachers indicated that teacher research has significant advantages in both identifying and analyzing classroom incidents; that teacher researchers frame their own theory and find value in generalizations of others as a way of clarifying their own experiences; and that personal rewards for involvement in research include increased respect for professionalism, greater job satisfaction, greater public esteem, stimulation of new ideas, and improved classroom environments. Quotes from teachers illustrate these points. Section 3 of the paper outlines conditions needed for sustaining teacher research. These include: regular stimulation, identification of legitimate and useful research, help to shape research goals and design research programs, collaboration in reporting and writing, and administrative support. One conclusion is that the most important resource for teacher researchers is time and teachers need to be provided with an occasional release day. The findings suggest that teachers have the capacity to make important research contributions in areas not previously considered part of their normal role. (ND)

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BRINGING A RESEARCH FOCUS INTO THE TEACHING ROLE

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Paper presented as part of a Symposium "Supporting Teachers' Research: Dimensions of School University Collaboration" at the American Educational Research Association Conference in San Francisco, 18-22 April, 1995.

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Inviting a teacher response

Section 1 of this paper attempts to outline our reflections after working with teachers for many years. Like so many reports the teacher voice was lacking* and we were keen to include and acknowledge any insights that teachers wished to add in response to Section 1.

The following questions were used to guide the teacher responses which then formed Sections 2 and 3 of the paper.

- Is the paper a reasonable analysis of the results of our attempts to encourage teacher development?
- What happens to teachers as they begin to reconsider their teaching approach and role?
- What's in it for teachers? Why do they persist when there are few incentives and many constraints and difficulties in reconsidering and implementing new teaching approaches?

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* The preparation of this paper coincided with the commencement of the PAVOT project (Perceptions and Voice of Teachers) support by the Australian Research Council to encourage and disseminate teacher research efforts.

Introduction

In many ways this paper is prepared a decade later than we might have expected. Both authors have been significantly involved in teacher efforts to re-examine their role and their impact on student learning. We have seen the positive outcomes for students and the professional development for teachers. Teachers have generated new knowledge about teaching and learning and have been major contributors to two books (Baird and Mitchell, 1986; Baird and Northfield, 1993), numerous newsletters and papers in communicating their findings. The commitment and achievement of these teachers has surprised us and we have worked for several years to gain some support from traditional research fund sources for teacher research. In 1995 we begin a three year program to support and disseminate teacher research with funding from the Australian Research Council. Our delight at having a proposal for teacher research accepted has been followed by a questioning of what we are doing and why - questions that could have been part of our agenda many years ago but in a strange way can only be addressed in light of our extensive experience.

The authors' backgrounds provide important information to understand this paper's perspective. The first author is an academic involved in teacher education with a particular interest in the professional development possibilities of teacher research and the dissemination of the teacher achievements. One year in the classroom allowed another perspective to develop and provided powerful learning about the teacher role as a researcher in the classroom. The second author has maintained a dual teacher-academic role and has been a key person in establishing the school-university collaboration, an important feature of our success in supporting and encouraging teachers. We were interested in how teachers would respond to our analysis? Do they perceive teacher research and its possibilities in the same ways as we do? The second part of the paper includes teacher responses to our critical analysis of ten years of experience working with teachers. As we embark on our attempt to have the teacher voice presented in shaping, undertaking and reporting research it seems appropriate to hear their response to our clarification of what might be possible and the conditions for effective teacher involvement in research.

Background

The collaborative structures that provide the context for this paper evolved form the Project for Enhancing Effective Learning (PEEL), a cross-faculty collaborative action research project that began in a Melbourne high school in 1985 with the primary aim of

promoting more metacognitive learning. PEEL was intended to run for two years, but two reasons have meant that it continues to the present day. Firstly, the challenge of achieving classroom change , although always regarded as difficult, was revealed to be a more complex problem then had been anticipated, secondly the teachers found the process of collaboration to be stimulating and supportive - they did not want to give it up. Over the past 11 years, PEEL groups have spread to many other schools and a PEEL Collective provides structures for support and for sharing of ideas between groups. One consequence of this expansion was a drop in what could be described as more formal research aspects of the project. However the Collective has provided regular forums for teachers and academics to share ideas. This meant that they developed the trusts, common perspectives and shared agendas that Mitchell and Erickson (1995) have identified as essential for successful collaborative research.

In 1994, a pilot project was established involving the authors and PEEL teachers from several schools who responded to a request for teachers interested in investing time and effort in designing conducting and reporting teacher-led research. These teachers, who will continue in an expanded group of teacher-researchers in 1995, responded to a draft of the first section of this paper.

Section 1 Some long over due reflections

Teacher research, what's in it for teachers?

The ultimate goal for any educational initiative is improvement in student learning and PEEL efforts produced evidence for changed learning outcomes (Baird and Northfield, 1993, pp. 37-104). With our related interest in teacher change and involvement, the PEEL project has been argued as a very effective way to support teachers who are learning about teaching and learning. Farnham-Diggory (1994) analyses learning approaches by examining assumptions being made about how a novice becomes more expert. In her terms, the developmental model with its emphasis on examining and testing personal beliefs, would fit the teacher learning we are hoping for. But what is the expertise which teachers are developing, what are we expecting teachers to get better at?

When we reflected on the last 10 years we realised that the label "teacher-researcher" encompassed at least five different dimensions and these provided different forms of reward for teachers. Some of these had proved accessible to larger proportion of teachers than others. One dimension involves teachers using different teaching approaches and so increasing their teaching and assessment repertoire. If these new

strategies are used consistently there are likely to be modifications and extensions as teachers interpret student responses. At this point teachers are beginning to generalise - to interpret and explicate what is happening thus demonstrating another dimension of expertise. The confidence and ability to develop new strategies represents a third dimension. The two dimensions which have so far been accessible to the smallest proportions of teachers have been collecting and using data to justify activities and purposes and communicating ideas and experiences to others. There are few rewards for these last two dimensions in teachers' career structures.

Many teachers have found that their involvement with PEEL has affirmed their efforts and ideas and provided a lift in confidence and self-esteem. Affirming teacher efforts has emerged as a crucial role for the academics in collaboration with the teachers. It is directed to teachers as individuals who are working in an important and interesting vocation. It has been important to affirm that teachers have the ability to make a difference and are able to say valuable things to colleagues, academics and the wider community. Their knowledge and experience may be different to that which is available from traditional sources and research but it has its own value and validity in education. This affirmation of good teaching together with having new teaching strategies to consider, seems to be prerequisite for teachers to further study teaching and learning. Both authors have seen the impact of PEEL on many teachers but have become increasingly aware of the difficulties associated with teacher participation in studies of their teaching and learning. It has been volunteer teachers who have joined and participated in the PEEL networks and the two authors have occasionally had discussions about what percentage of teachers seem to find the right conditions and incentives to persist and gain from their involvement. While many teachers benefit from their contact with PEEL teacher activity, we estimate that only about 5% to 20% of teachers are able to become developers and communicators of new ideas. It has also been difficult to gain system-wide support for PEEL type work as an accepted part of professional development policies in the situations we have experienced*. PEEL approaches take time and are about teacher concerns whereas system priorities are generally about an agenda of communicating policies and curriculum changes to teachers. Yet the capacity of teachers to address issues of teaching and learning is becoming widely

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* It is interesting to note that the PEEL approach and publications are used for system wide professional development in Sweden and Denmark where different professional development expectations exist for teachers.

recognised and it seems an appropriate time to review what we have learned about the nature of teacher research and the constraints associated with teachers becoming involved.

The nature of teacher research

The varying perspectives and multiple motivations for teacher research have been recently analysed by Richardson (1994). The term practical inquiry is used to include the view that teaching is a form of research, that teaching can be improved by reflecting on practice, and that teachers can generate new knowledge and understandings about daily school level concerns:

> *"Practical inquiry is conducted by practitioners to help them understand their contexts, practices and, in the case of teachers, their students"* (p.7)

Our analysis over more than a decade would highlight the following qualitative differences between teacher research and more formal research.

1. The origin of the research effort is often a long-term concern rarely expressed as a specific research question by the teacher.
2. The teacher has the confidence and support to feel that the concern can be understood and possibly addressed in some way. It is rare for teachers to have the skills, confidence and support to research their own classrooms. This feature of teacher research is crucial. Russell (1993) identifies the low respect many teachers have for their own experience and ideas when compared to external forms of knowledge. The conditions of teaching rarely allow the time and support to allow teachers to feel that they can understand and address their school level concerns.
3. When they attempt to better understand their classrooms, teachers have a huge range of data sources to consider as they pursue their teaching role. The complex context makes communicating the situation difficult. In this situation a significant incident is often used to exemplify the area of concern. Vignettes become the medium for capturing and discussing the issues among teachers.
4. Teacher researchers are trying to improve their classrooms, hence intentions of immediate action in the form of classroom intervention are embedded in their research questions. New knowledge and understanding becomes inseparable from the implications and actions that follow for the teacher. Changes are made as the data are gathered and so the situation constantly alters as the teacher tries to

establish the conditions for better learning. There is rarely time to organise and explain the outcomes to others as the daily demands of teaching take over.

5. The new understandings are very often not what the teacher expects or wants. Teachers are confronted with things they may not want to hear or know about. Many teachers comment on having their ideas shattered and experiencing a sense of failure as a teacher.

> *"As a student teacher, I learned that students waste time during class. Two years later, I learned that teachers waste more time in class than most disruptive students could imagine. Learning about the extent of student time-wasting was a blow to the ideal that lead me to teaching. Learning about teacher time-wasting was a shock ... Yet there is hope."* A teacher Mick Dunne p.190 in Baird and Mitchell, 1986.

Unfortunately teaching must go on and teachers have to live with their new reality and adjust to the consequences of their new findings and the actions they initiate.

6. Teacher researchers have to respond within the complexities and unique contexts of **their** classrooms within **their** schools. In more formal research the detailed context and complexity can be removed to develop new knowledge of value to the wider educational community. The teachers concerns emerge from very complex contexts and attempts to simplify the problem will inevitably be followed by strong reminders of the context when actions are initiated in the classroom. Often factors which have not been acknowledged by teachers or researchers (eg what happens with other teachers, anxiety about new approaches for pupils) become apparent when a teacher attempts a new approach. Therefore teacher and students often go backwards in their relationships in change situations and it requires a self-assured teacher to begin this type of research and cope with the consequences in their classroom changes.

7. The outcomes of teacher research are difficult for teachers to communicate. There may be significant personal satisfaction with having gained a level of understanding and successfully implementing some change in the classroom, but the findings are seen as very closely linked to that teacher in that particular situation. One of the most significant early outcomes of our work with teachers was the impact of teacher accounts of their experience on teacher readers. Teachers were able to make links with the concerns and the contexts being described. The suggestions for action were able to be assessed as plausible and

potentially fruitful (Posner et al, 1982). The reader was being allowed to generalise to their own situations and so the new knowledge was tentative, context dependent but potentially useful for others, if we could document the teacher voice.

One consequence of the last two points is that many teachers are hostile to what they see as theory - context free generalisations. However, it has been interesting to observe that teachers themselves appreciate the need for generalisations as they make sense of events. "Theory" is an outcome of their inquiry and the result of their ability to explicate their findings for colleagues; an important aspect of expertise outlined earlier.

8. The "new" knowledge, which is an outcome of teacher research, can be considered in two dimensions. In some cases it is the tacit knowledge of good teachers being made more explicit under conditions which encourage reflection and discussion. In other cases it is "new" in the sense of new insights, new teaching ideas and their impact on students and new understanding of self. In all cases collaboration with others seems to be essential. We would also argue the importance of communication of experience to others if what is done is to be called teacher research.

The difficulties in creating conditions of practical inquiry

Seeing what some teachers have been able to achieve when practical inquiry has been incorporated into their teaching role has been balanced by appreciating the difficulties in establishing the practice beyond a small number of volunteer teachers. Many teachers are interested in the ideas and experiences of teacher research but few become participants in generating and communicating new knowledge. In a time when educational cutbacks and efficiencies are a priority, those responsible for developing professional development policies will be wary of the need for long-term support directed to a few teachers who need collaborative networks to achieve their outcomes.

Teaching is a job which is organised in ways to support the individual functioning in classroom units. A prerequisite for teachers to engage in practical inquiry is to have opportunities for them to be more dependent on, and trust colleagues to be a source of support and new ideas. Opportunities for teachers to collaborate over professional matters requires workload and industrial conditions that have been difficult to argue especially in difficult economic times for education. Those teachers that are prepared to find extra time to work with others must believe in the "authority of their experience" (Russell and Munby,

1994) as a way forward in their improvement. These teachers will need to find other teachers who have similar views and aspirations for this extended teaching role. As they learn more about teaching and learning they are likely to become uncomfortable about what they find out about themselves and their classrooms. They will realise the difficulty of educational change and experience "going backwards" before making any progress. Many of the findings are disappointing - they often do not wish to know what they find out but they cannot avoid the consequences as their teaching must inevitably alter and they must live with their findings. People like Mitchell and Northfield urge the wider dissemination of their findings yet many teachers respond with comments such as:

> *"Who will wish to know about my classroom experience - they will have different problems, different children in different schools and communities?"*

Where will teachers find the time to engage in and share the results of their inquiry into their classrooms? Why would any teacher commit themselves to what becomes a very difficult task with few incentives? As we move into a further stage of our work with teachers, and attempt to encourage practical inquiry and its wider publication, it seems appropriate to ask teachers why they would wish to become involved and what is in it for them.

Section 2 *Teacher responses*

The teachers generally agreed with our analysis but found their experiences were more positive than we implied. Their responses extended our analysis of the nature of teacher research in several areas:

Judie pointed out why a teacher research has significant advantages both in identifying and in analysing important classroom incidents

> *"Teachers have content and context knowledge, often historical knowledge of their students (going back up to 5 years), and have negotiated (often having to work through disputes and distrusts) a working environment based on trusts and relationships. Outside researchers can only hope to tap into this on a very superficial level." (Judie)*

This rich contextual knowledge will mean, for example, that a teacher may place very different interpretations and significance on the same behaviour from two students.

There was disagreement from the teachers with either or both of point 5 and the comment in point 6 that teachers often go backwards.

> *"You say that teachers are confronted with things they don't want to know or hear about. I don't know if its always shattering - often what you find out is just a confirmation of what you suspected anyway. Often it's a problem that is a dilemma and there is no satisfactory solution, and the way of dealing with it is, at best, still unsatisfactory and unsatisfying." (Judie)*

> *"I think you make too much of the setbacks - they do exist, but most of us get battle-scarred fairly quickly and learn to live with and rationalise the many negatives which happen." (Judie)*

> *"You do want to know (because you probably suspected this anyway) but doing something about it is another matter." (Ellen)*

> *"Being a member of the PEEL group at Bellarine Secondary College and researching good learning behaviours in my Year 10 science class (1994) was a very positive experience (time consuming - but positive). I don't feel I went backwards (maybe sideways) but spent time reassessing what I was doing and why." (Ellen)*

It seems that teachers who take on the role of research are expecting to uncover unsatisfactory aspects of their own teaching. however, as Damian and Jo imply, not all teachers share this attitude.

> *"I am not convinced that too many teachers are uncomfortable about finding out about themselves and their classroom. But then the more I think about many of my peers I could be wrong." (Damian)*

> *"Other teachers didn't want to share ideas, they became defensive about their teaching practice." (Jo)*

The issue of context-free generalisations raised in points 6 and 7 emerged as an important and complex issue. Teacher researchers do come to frame their own theory and to find value in other peoples generalisations as a way of clarifying their own experiences.

> *"I strongly related to the point of the need to understand more about theory after the process of research." (Steve)*

> *"[We are] able to make explicit [our] beliefs on teaching. [This] gives a purpose for doing things the way we do." (Jo)*

The problem may be one of communication - each generalisation may need to be communicated in several contexts. This approach will increase intelligibility, plausibility (Posner et al, 1992) and allow teachers to see that they can make a difference. It will also

enable other teachers to see examples of how the suggestions for actions that result from the generalisation are moulded to fit some typical contexts.

> *"I like reading about other teachers' classrooms, and am always able to generalise from the context. What I cannot do is make a context for a piece of research that has minimised or removed the context. Teachers recognise classrooms, and differences in age (secondary/primary) or continent, don't even matter." (Judie)*

Precisely how to structure such communication is a challenge that lies in front of us. Another aspect of this issue is that the rate at which teacher researchers come to value and feel comfortable with "theory" may vary substantially.

The teachers provided a rich list of personal pay offs for their involvement in research. This list increases ones respect for their professionalism. These can be grouped into four categories. One was greater job satisfaction: a self esteem, greater confidence, a sense of personal growth.

> *"The feeling that you are not perfect, but you are trying to do your best for the students." (Ellen)*

> *"Job satisfaction I guess is the major motivation - feeling you are doing something about the underlying concerns that are always there. The satisfaction of feeling you are getting better at the job should not be underestimated. Because it requires such an enormous input of energy and self on the part of the teacher, it makes sense to search for ways of creating more satisfying and rewarding interactions." (Judie)*

> *"An important positive for me was that the process I was involved with helped give greater definition to the role of a teacher and teaching itself." (Steve)*

The second type of pay off was greater public esteem in the eyes of both other teachers, principals and academics. A third pay off was the stimulation from new ideas, and also from the process of collaborative problem solving.

> *"Jill and I were often very excited about what we found out. Sometimes uncomfortable, we didn't know where we were heading but knew we couldn't go back." (Jo)*

> *"Intellectual curiosity? When you start promoting it amongst the kids, maybe some of it rubs off on you!" (Judie)*

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, there was the pay off of better classrooms: classrooms which had better learning and which were less stressful. The teachers responses strongly supported point 4 - they always included action in their research design

and this paid off. They also appreciated their enhanced capacity to analyse and tackle hitherto intractable problems.

> *"My job is certainly more purposeful ..."*
>
> *"I now have a much better understanding of what I can offer students and of how they learn ..."*
>
> *"[I am] able to recognise weaknesses and then work on them ..."*
>
> *"... the kids benefit. They have changed [and] they enjoyed last year." (Jo)*

Damian pointed out that some of our dimensions of expertise should really be considered to be part of good teaching.

> *"... are we researchers or merely good teachers if we develop the 'ability to develop new strategies representing a third form of expertise'. Should teacher change be expected as part of the job or seen as part of research." (Damian)*

Section 3 Some conditions needed for sustaining teacher research

Good teaching can be considered to be a form of research (Richardson, 1994). However, the profession typically does not provide structures which stimulate or support reflection, analysis, collaboration and communication

> *"Affirming teacher work has always been a problem associated with out career. Compared to private industry we do not value colleagues' achievements highly enough." (Damian)*

Our experiences of the last 10 years and the teacher responses suggest a number of conditions for promoting and supporting teacher research.

The process must be empowering not disempowering. This means that academic teacher relationships must be collaborative and not top down. It also means that the concerns and goals should be those of the teachers, not those imposed by a system. The role of the system is to provide conditions which maximise the opportunities for teachers to increase their professionalism.

The condition of empowerment does not mean that academics do not have a number of crucial roles in supporting teacher research. These include:

- providing regular stimulation; the daily demands of teaching constantly threaten to overwhelm a teacher's research and activities and we have found it important to schedule some form of contact every four weeks.

- clarifying what can be legitimate and useful research. Teachers typically have, and are not attracted by, process-product conceptions of research.

  "The concept of teacher research conjures up in individuals the idea of control groups, target groups, test groups, etc. As teachers I don't think it is very easy to clearly define these groups within our classes. There can be too many variables within each group." (Damian)

- helping shape research goals and design research programs.
- helping make teachers' tacit wisdom more explicit
- collaborating in reporting and writing
- providing off the forms of affirmation described earlier.

Another aspect of affirmation that emerged was the importance of the principal being aware and supportive of what was going on. The principal of one school did not share the educational values of the teacher researchers and made decisions that were incompatible with their goals. This was a source of considerable stress. The interest of high status outsiders in a school-based initiative can be very helpful in generating principal support.

The most important resource which can be given to teacher researchers is time; some important forms of reflection can be incorporated into a school day, but some cannot, and the capacity to provide teachers with an occasional release day has been crucial.

Conclusion

It is clear to us that teachers have the capacity to make important contributions in areas which they have not previously conceived to be part of their normal role. However, this is an academic perspective, it must be matched by a shift in conceptions in the teaching profession of what is possible and a shift in attitude by teachers, principals and system administrators as to what is worthwhile.

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